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ABSTRACT

This study of the Western Governors University (WGU) suggests that its instructional model, based on distance education, could increase the value of teaching relative to research. The WGU model envisions a "disaggregated faculty," that is, one in which faculty roles typically discharged by a single individual are delegated and outsourced to various specialists; curriculum development is assigned to program councils composed of outside experts; student assessment is assigned to other councils; advising is done by the WGU staff; and teaching of subject matter is done by instructors employed by approved educational providers. Using a model limited to distance education, this concept values teaching, rather than research or service, and functions with minimal governance. The study suggests three reasons why the WGU model might result in teaching challenging the domination of research: (1) it offers institutions low in the traditional academic hierarchy an opportunity to develop a strong national reputation based on teaching alone; (2) it offers individual faculty members external validation of their teaching activities, thus enhancing their employment opportunities; and (3) it creates opportunities for an entrepreneurial teaching faculty. While the study notes that enrollment in WGU programs has not met expectations thus far, it concludes that the WGU model offers a new way of thinking about the future of higher education. (RAB)

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Teaching vs. Research:

A WGU-Style Promotion of the Instructional Role

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This manuscript is prepared for a roundtable discussion at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, April 28, 2000, New Orleans, Louisiana. Please direct any questions or comments to the author:

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Teaching vs. Research: A WGU-Style Promotion of the Instructional Role

Larry Cuban (1999) wrote recently that "the research imperative has so dominated academic work as to become a truism. The contradiction of professors being hired to teach yet rewarded with tenure and promotion for publishing research has become an academic cliche" (p. 1). His book, *How Scholars Trumped Teachers*, traces the history of this fact, ultimately reaching the rather pessimistic conclusion that no reform effort in the offing will soon succeed in toppling research from its perch atop the academic hierarchy. The system that has developed in American higher education over the last century, Cuban suggests, gives teaching little hope of prevailing in the competition with research for academic prestige.

Cuban, however, gives little attention to the potential of distance education to challenge this dynamic. I believe that there are several reasons to believe that new instructional models based on distance education could give teaching the upper hand -- or at least level the playing field -- in considering its value relative to research.

My conclusions were reached through a study of the Western Governors University, which I have described elsewhere (1999) as a pioneering institution -- not so much for what it has done, but for its symbolic impact on American higher education. Whether WGU succeeds or fails institutionally, the fact of the matter is that it represents a new model for postsecondary education, with implications that should not be ignored. It challenges received wisdom regarding, among other things, how colleges and universities should be organized, how faculty should spend their time, and how learning should be rewarded. And, to the point of this paper, WGU offers an intriguing example of what an institution truly devoted to teaching might look like.

This may seem like a strange assertion given that WGU employs no faculty in any

traditional sense and that it specifically rejects instruction as a necessary component of a degree-granting institution. But a careful examination of the WGU model will show that the academic responsibilities that are assumed by the institution have nothing to do with research and everything to do with teaching. Briefly, the WGU model calls for a "disaggregated faculty" -- that is, the faculty roles typical discharged by a single individual are delegated and outsourced to multiple people. Curriculum development is handled by program councils made up of outside experts. Assessment of student learning is overseen by another council. Advising is covered by WGU staff. And actual teaching of the subject matter is conducted by instructors employed by approved educational providers.

Significantly, these roles considered by WGU only include the instructional component of what traditional faculty members do. There is no mention of research, none of service, and governance is almost entirely absent (the exception being the program councils' authority over the academic policy for a particular degree). One might call WGU a teaching university except, of course, it does not teach. But it does value teaching exclusively to an extent that few other institutions could claim. By not considering research and service in the mix of faculty responsibilities at all, the institution has stripped away everything else but teaching from the traditional faculty responsibilities. Organizationally, as well as philosophically, WGU provides rewards for nothing but teaching -- albeit only the kind of teaching which is appropriate for courses taken at a distance. Whether called curricular design, assessment, or actual instruction, these are all teaching activities specifically and exclusively promoted by WGU. In breaking up the faculty role in this way -- placing the emphasis squarely on teaching -- WGU suggests a reconceptualization of the professoriate that the 'disaggregated faculty' nomenclature glosses

over. Research, dominant since the rise of the universities a century ago, now can be challenged by teaching.

There are a couple of reasons to begin to think in this way. First, from an institutional perspective, the WGU model provides potential rewards for a teaching focus that have not been generally present in the traditional academy. One of WGU's basic operating principles is to build a broader market for "educational and assessment services" -- in other words, to build a market for teaching (Western Governors Association, 1996). Through a policy of listing any distance education course from an accredited college or university in its online catalog, WGU gives institutions a way to gain wider exposure for their faculty's excellent efforts in this area. A college, low in the institutional hierarchy by traditional standards, could potentially develop a strong national reputation based on teaching alone. Institutional prestige could be measured by the enrollments generated through WGU rather than the amount of federally sponsored research, number and kind of degrees awarded, or selectivity in admissions as is suggested, for example, by the Carnegie Foundation classifications or US News and World Report rankings. Institutions which seek national teaching status would hire faculty and give them the incentives and resources to excel in this area. For these schools, perhaps, research on teaching would be expected for tenure and promotion. New course preparations would not involve the narrow specialty of the faculty member, but rather the development of a distance education module for WGU distribution. While policies such as these exist at colleges and universities now, the WGU model could increase their use throughout the system, creating an alternative career path for faculty who choose this route.

This leads to a second reason to think that teaching can begin to compete with research.

The WGU model gives individual faculty members external validation of their activities, potentially allowing teachers to translate their skills into better employment opportunities. Currently teaching is oriented toward the local college or university, while research is oriented toward the broader disciplinary community. Because of this, faculty who conduct excellent research are sought after by other institutions, recruited for their research talent and the corresponding prestige that their appointment would bring the college or university. They can become the star faculty who few students see and who are allowed, expected even, to concentrate on their research with only minimal instructional responsibilities. The locally-oriented teaching faculty, on the other hand, can claim little ability to leverage their skills toward appointments elsewhere, and few institutions actively recruit them. The WGU model, however, provides a way for teaching faculty to adopt an externally-oriented perspective toward their work. They could potentially build a reputation outside of their home institutions that would offer the same sorts of benefits as the research faculty member currently receives. A course that is successfully taken by large numbers of students through WGU is a resource that many institutions would enthusiastically sponsor, and the faculty member who had proven his or her ability to conduct such learning experiences would be an extremely attractive asset. The number one economics teacher would be as sought after as the top economics scholar and could command a similar level of attention on a national scale

A third reason to hypothesize a change in the role of the faculty toward teaching is the potential a WGU-style model creates for an entrepreneurial teaching faculty. Imagine a group of English professors getting together and independently offering courses over the internet for WGU, or any similar institution. There would be no need any longer for an affiliation with a more

traditional college or university. All this group of faculty would have to do is hang out their shingle and advertise learning for sale -- to be validated at the end by a WGU-style credential. While current WGU rules for affiliation would not allow a group such as this to be official education providers, there is little to prevent it from forming and offering instructional services to students. Since, as a competency-based institution, WGU only cares about the learning outcomes, not the source, students could take competency assessments regardless of who or what provided the instruction, officially approved or not. No one needs WGU's permission for the teaching-learning exchange to occur, and certainly entrepreneurs will take advantage of any market a WGU-style institution would create. Faculty have been entrepreneurs since the first textbooks produced royalty checks. Now, just as their research-oriented colleagues have been able to found their own biotechnology companies, for example, teaching faculty could create a distance education company out of the same entrepreneurial spirit.

As a pioneer institution, WGU represents a new way of thinking about the future of higher education. But making predictions at this stage is a gamble. There is little way of knowing how the WGU experiment will turn out, nor is there much information about how pervasive its influence will be on other institutions -- both traditional and non-traditional -- that consider themselves in the business of education. The evidence that exists, in fact, suggests that enrollment in WGU programs has not met expectations. But much of what is important about WGU does not rely on the institution itself being immediately successful. The viability of WGU's various components is an empirical question that could take decades of failure before an affirmative answer is recorded. The curricular reforms attempted at Harvard in the 1820s provides an historical example. It took the presidency of Charles Eliot, forty years later, before the elective

course of study became a workable alternative to the prescriptions of the colonial college. A rejected WGU could be an institution before its time as easily as a reform that failed.

It is important now, however, to consider the implications of a WGU-style focus on the teaching role of faculty. With the rise of virtual universities and for-profit educational alternatives, the role of the participating faculty has been circumscribed by a similar exclusive emphasis on instruction. These trends may place teaching in the academic drivers seat, while simultaneously deprofessionalizing the faculty. Avoiding this outcome does not mean rejecting all alternative instructional models. Rather it involves understanding the teaching role and how these new models -- particularly those involving distance education technology -- can shift the balance from spending time on research toward spending time on teaching. This may not be a comfortable transition for those of us who consider ourselves teachers and academics in the traditional sense. But as Larry Cuban (1999) pointed out in the book mentioned at the beginning of this proposal, our continued acceptance of tradition has skewed the faculty role. He was reluctant to predict a change. But perhaps a shift is beginning to become evident in WGU -- a struggling, upstart institution, famously pioneering a new model of postsecondary education.

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